

# Oman

## Husbandmen of the Garden of Arabia

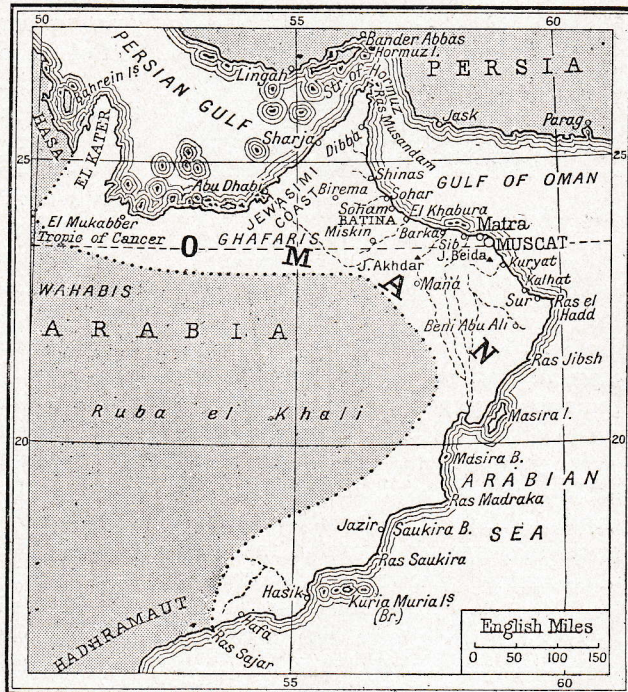
By the Rev. Dr. Ewing, M.C.

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**O**MAN (Arabic, Amān), one of the most important divisions of Arabia, lies at the south-east corner of the peninsula. The coast line, starting a little west of meridian  $53^{\circ}$  E. long., sweeps round from the Arabian Sea, and runs out into "the horn of Oman," which terminates in Ras Musandam, dividing the Gulf of Oman from the Persian Gulf. Thence it bends south and westward in an irregular line to the promontory of El-Kater, and marches with the province of Hasa about midway up the Persian Gulf. Oman is a mountainous district, the main range standing roughly parallel to the shore. This range is flanked on either side by lower uplands, spacious valleys lying between. At intervals enormous gorges break down, cutting right across the ranges, to the sea. These are marked by a certain wild and savage grandeur. Many are quite impassable. Two or three afford access to the interior: but in no case is the journey easy; often it is both difficult and perilous. Inland the slopes descend steeply to the borders of the trackless desert of sand, Ruba el-Khali, which no human foot has ever crossed. The total area of Oman is about 82,000 square miles.

Within this limited space there are great varieties of climatic conditions, of scenery, soil, and products. On the

coast the heat is very great. Muscat, the principal seaport, enclosed on three sides by the hills, is said to be the hottest town in Arabia. The moist atmosphere makes it oppressive. Not many miles away the crests of Jebel Akhdar, rising to a height of about 10,000 feet, may be gleaming white with a covering of snow. A picture of dream-like beauty and attractiveness they present to the thirsty, perspiring traveller approaching from the sea. The mountain rises abruptly from the sea at Ras Musandam, runs southward, and turns to the south-east. Between its slopes and the sea, reaching from the Ras to Muscat, lies the fertile district of Batina. The mountain



INDEPENDENT STATE OF OMAN





#### MODESTY GROTESQUELY MASKED

Her yashmak, with its hawk-like nosepiece, peculiar to Oman, gives an odd Mephistophelean touch to the appearance of this tight-trousered, toe-ringed woman of Muscat

itself is largely barren and rugged, especially where it is torn by the transverse gorges. Great blocks of tumbled granite and limestone make chaos on steeps that are rent by many narrow and precipitous defiles. The name Akhdar comes from the flush of green that spreads over the mountain in the spring. The streams that descend from the slopes are soon lost in the desert, but they give rise here and there to wonderfully fruitful oases. There vegetation is luxuriant, and fevers are rife. From the vineyards

fronting the sea, it is said, the Portuguese exported the vines which they called "muscatelle."

Alike on the west and east slopes there are occasional prosperous and well-built villages, with palm groves and irrigated fields. Away in the north-west, where the land dips toward the Jewasimi coast, it is wild and steppe-like: but even there two great oases break the monotony, one of which, Birema, has about 15,000 inhabitants. Farther west, low uninhabited levels reach out northward to the salt marshes by the sea, and southward to the desert.

The lateral valleys between Jebel Akhdar and its flanking ranges offer a remarkable and pleasing contrast to the grim wilderness with which they are girt. In these wide uplands, even in the height of summer, the heat is never oppressive. In winter often it is almost cold. The wadis, true to their Arabian character, are but torrent beds. In the season of rain they collect the water falling on the hills, and with great uproar carry it to the sea. The rest of the year they are silent and dry. But, in shady nook and rocky cleft, there are numerous springs of clear, cool water, fed from deep reservoirs in the mountains' heart, depending for supplies on the melting snows of winter. This water, husbanded with extreme care, is equal to all necessities, irrigating field, garden, and orchard, and providing for domestic use. Underground conduits, called feluj, are largely employed. They prevent loss by evaporation and otherwise.

Consider for a moment the finest of these upland vales, Wadi Tyin. It lies between Jebel Beida, "white mountain," and Jebel Hallowi, from 2,000 to 3,000 feet above sea level. You may approach it by way of the valley of Semail, and enter it through Wadi Muscat. Or you may go up from the small port of Kuryat, by Wadi Hail, and on through the gorges of Wadi Thaika, or "the Devil's Gap." Issuing



## OMAN & ITS ARABS

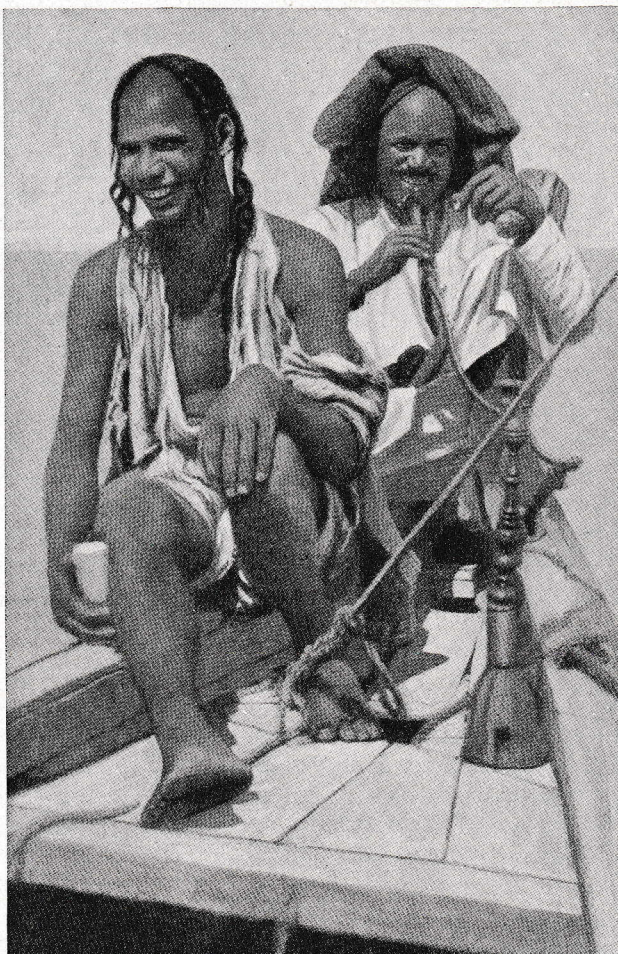
from the sombre and jagged tortuosities of the defiles, a scene of wonderful beauty breaks upon the sight. The great hollow among the hills, twenty-five miles in length, running south-east and north-west, has been aptly called "the Garden of Oman." The greenery, occasional and fragmentary elsewhere, here comes to perfection.

Among many forms of vegetable life tamarisks, flame-blossomed oleanders, and acacias are prominent. Specially impressive are the great masses of date palms. There are twenty-nine villages; some in secluded and secure ravines which deeply gash the mountain slope on either side of the valley: round others in the open rise groves of graceful palms. Water, the wizard, works wonders everywhere. The Arabs say that there are 360 springs in the vale. Vineclad slopes, broad fields of waving grain, vegetable gardens, and fair orchards vie with each other in a riot of productiveness. Dates are, of course, most plentiful, and form a principal article of export: but there is no lack of grapes, apricots, peaches, oranges, and mulberries. Melons, mangoes, and other fruits are abundant.

Wild animals are not numerous. Among them are ibex (wa'il of the Arabs), wild goat, hyena, fox, jackal, and hare. Snakes are numerous and venomous. Around the coast water snakes are plentiful.

Many characteristics are common to all dwellers in Arabia. The inhabitants of Oman are of pure Arab blood, and

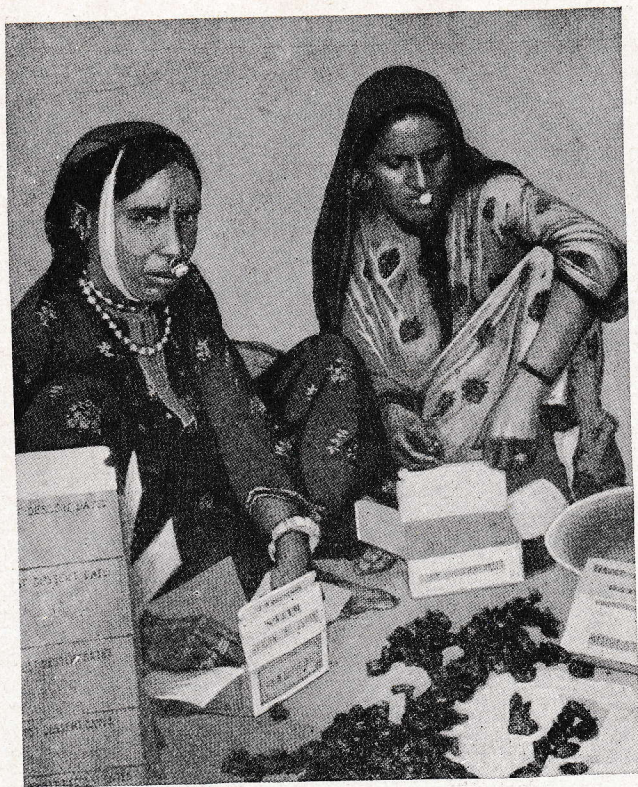
share the main features of their life with their kinsmen of el-Yemen, who are described in the chapter on Arabia. The villagers belie the ordinary conception of the Arab as an idle person with a distaste for work, incapable of sustained effort, who is roused to enthusiasm only by the prospect of robber raid or tribal strife. These men are painstaking and persevering. They may work with primitive implements, but they are really very skilful husbandmen; and their wise industry secures the utmost that the soil can yield. They live remote from the rush and



PLEASING SMILES DISARM SUSPICION

Piracy was a popular occupation of the Omanites, who were long a scourge in the neighbouring seas. Even now only wholesome fear of the White Ensign deters them from scuttling ships and from looting vessels wrecked upon their shores.





PACKING MUSCAT DATES FOR EXPORT

Oman is beautified by great masses of date palms, and for centuries Muscat has been a market for their fruit. Dates are still the principal export of the country, providing employment for numbers of women in the packing-rooms

bustle of our modern world, and cannot understand why one should ever hurry. It gravely compromises a man's dignity. A favourite proverb is: "Haste is from the devil; leisureliness from the Merciful"—i.e., from God. "Time is money," I once said to an Arab. "Wallahi," he replied, "I have much of that!"

The mountains look arid and sterile, but there is a considerable population of shepherds and goatherds who rear large flocks. Their houses are rude, oval structures of loose stones. Their food is the flesh of their animals and vegetables. They also grow a little indigo, for which there is a demand in the villages.

The Beduin tribes are restless and turbulent. They pretty well realize the popular conception of the Arab.

The blood feud prevails among them. The immortal laws of hospitality are honoured, and "The guest of God" is respected. But dangers are not lacking. In matters of treachery and violence the Arab's standard of honour is not ours. Even his faithful oath is a brittle thing if it go against his own interest: and faith need not be kept with a kafir. One must not be over trustful.

Colonel S. B. Miles describes the townsman as "a plain man, simple in his habits: his wants are few, and however well off he may be he does not indulge in luxurious sloth, or surround himself with many articles of needless luxury. Even the women's apartments are bare and empty: a carpet, a box of clothes, and articles of domestic use are the only things to be seen."

They are great smokers of tobacco and drinkers of coffee; and rumour sadly maligns them if the wine-cup does not circulate fairly freely among them. It was in the midst of this people, in the town of Muscat, that the sainted Bishop French, formerly bishop of Lahore, spent the last years of his life as a lonely missionary.

The Omanites were deeply involved in the piracy that for so long was the scourge of the neighbouring seas. Oman was also the main centre of the slave trade in south Arabia. British gunboats had much to do with the suppression of both. This did not enhance the popularity of our countrymen. The wild men sought compensation for their losses in the loot of wrecked vessels whose crews they ruthlessly murdered. According to Idrisi, Sohar is the most



## OMAN & ITS ARABS

ancient town of Oman ; but very early Muscat became the chief seaport. Thence, in far off days, China ships were wont to sail. As it grew in importance Sur and Kalhat on the Indian Ocean declined. "Muscat is of old a market for the carrying of horses and dates," says the old Portuguese commentator. "It is the principal entrepôt of the kingdom of Hormuz." The main exports are dates, hides, horses, asses, pearls from the Bahrein fisheries, and drugs. Oman also raises a famous breed of riding camels, "of great stature and force, but less patient of famine and thirst than some other kinds." (Doughty).

Oman has always maintained a certain independence of the rest of Arabia, from which she is cut off by impenetrable deserts. At the instance of Mahomet's messenger, Amr ibn el-As, the future conqueror of Egypt, Oman accepted Islam. Resenting the intrusion of an unwelcome governor, whom they "killed and crucified," the Omanites threw off allegiance to the Caliph Haroun Al Raschid, and elected their own Imam,

one Abdullah ibn Ibad. His followers developed heretical views on predestination and free will which severed them from other Moslems. They are more tolerant than the orthodox. Strangers may freely enter their mosques. Among the upper classes scepticism is not infrequent. The Ibadite is to the devout Mahomedan much what the Protestant is to the Roman Catholic. It is not easy to distinguish an Ibadite mosque from an ordinary dwelling house: the picturesque minaret is absent; and you must learn to note the inconspicuous little bell-like cone that takes its place at a corner of the containing wall.

The Abbasid caliphs sought to bring Oman again into submission, but with very partial success. After A.D. 1009 they gave up the attempt. Native imams were chosen on the elective principle. This fostered tribal rivalry and strife, while all through raged the bitter feud, still uncomposed, between the Yemenite Ghafari and Hinawi. The tribe of el-Azd held the imamate



LANDWARD VIEW OF MUSCAT, OMAN'S TORRID SEAPORT

Commanding the entrance to the Persian Gulf, Muscat has strategic importance as a naval base. Rugged mountains defend the town from attack by land, and the port was strongly fortified by the Portuguese, the ruins of their towering forts still giving dignity to its seaward aspect. Merchantmen trading with the East and pearlers from the Bahrein fisheries frequent the harbour



## OMAN & ITS ARABS

till A.D. 1154, the ruler living in Nizwa, at the foot of Jebel Akhdar. Then followed a succession of imams from the Beni Nabhan. Twice in this time the Persians invaded the country. The king of Hormuz claimed authority over the coast lands till the beginning of the sixteenth century.

### Portuguese and Persian Control

In A.D. 1435 a popular revolt from the tyranny of Beni Nabhan restored the imamate to the tribe of el-Azd. In A.D. 1508 the Portuguese seized most of the east coast, colonising Muscat, Matra, and Sohar. Nasir ibn Murshid, of the Yariba tribe, elected imam in A.D. 1624, made Rostok his residence, subdued the surrounding sheiks, and curtailed the influence of the Portuguese, who now paid tribute for their occupation of Muscat. The Portuguese were expelled from Muscat in 1651, and from the Omanite settlements on the east coast of Africa in 1698. After the departure of the Portuguese jealousies between rival imams, Saif and Ibn Murshid, put the country in the hands of the Persians, who were finally driven out by Imam Ahmad ibn Sa'id, founder of the present Ghafiri dynasty, in 1759. His capital was still Rostok.

### Suppression of Piracy

His son established relations with the British, and under Sa'id his grandson, the piracies on the Persian Gulf were suppressed. The Wahabis, the fanatical zealots of Islam, reduced the country to tribute. From this scourge it was freed in 1810, and Sa'id restored to independence. He extended his dominion to Sokotra, Zanzibar, and other places. Comparative peace prevailed during his liberal reign, and the ports of Sohar, Barka, and Muscat prospered. He moved his residence to the last named.

Irrked by the obligations attached to the imamate—a kind of priestly monarchy

—and by the oath requiring him to fight against the infidel, this ruler never assumed the title of Imam, which, with one short exception, has remained in abeyance ever since. He and his successors have been content with the style of Sultan.

At Sa'id's death the kingdom was divided, his youngest son taking Zanzibar, and the two elder contending for the throne of Oman. Through British influence this was secured for the eldest son. He was assassinated in 1888, and was succeeded by his son Feisal.

### Failing Prestige of the Sultanate

The sultanate rapidly declined in prosperity and importance. The sultan's authority soon became practically restricted to the town of Muscat. Even there his position could not have been maintained but for the support afforded by the presence of a British gunboat. He lived in a state of undeclared war with the Beduin chieftains in the mountains behind Muscat. In the course of an attack in February, 1895, under Sheik Saleh, he retired to the castle with his half-brother and, impotent to help, saw the town given up to plunder. At last a cash payment induced the rebels, free and unpunished, to retire.

Feisal died in 1913 and was succeeded by his eldest son Sa'id. Trouble pursued the new sultan, and for the next seven years rebellion persisted. The inland tribes elected an imam who, with a council of sheiks, established paramountcy over the interior. During the Great War Muscat was protected against assault from inland by a British-Indian force, and finally, in 1920, through the mediation of the British political agent an agreement was effected whereby the Beduins of the interior were conceded local autonomy and freedom of trade, with the result that the sultan's authority is now restricted to the littoral.

END OF VOLUME V.